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ABSTRACT

In some colleges and universities, linguistics does not have a positive image. This is due in part to the number of students that struggle through linguistic theory that they will forget once the examination or course is over. However, instructors can make linguistics courses serving primarily nonmajors more attractive by omitting certain topics and incorporating others that may be less central to the concerns of linguistic theory but are more interesting and useful to the nonspecialist. Since linguistics overlaps a number of disciplines, it both broadens and strengthens the background of students in linguistics-related fields. In addition, the practice of viewing language phenomena analytically transfers well to unrelated disciplines that require the same type of thinking, such as mathematics or computer science. Linguistics courses tailored to the nonmajor can be just as challenging as those that are not. (Author/MSE)

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LINGUISTICS IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

APPENDIX 4-N

Teaching Linguistics to Non-Linguistics Majors

by

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The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the LSA or the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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PREFACE

The Linguistics in the Undergraduate Curriculum (LUC) project is an effort by the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) to study the state of undergraduate instruction in linguistics in the United States and Canada and to suggest directions for its future development. It was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities during the period 1 January 1985-31 December 1987. The project was carried out under the direction of D. Terence Langendoen, Principal Investigator, and Secretary-Treasurer of the LSA. Mary Niebuhr, Executive Assistant at the LSA office in Washington, DC, was responsible for the day-to-day administration of the project with the assistance of Nicole VandenHeuvel and Dana McDaniel.

Project oversight was provided by a Steering Committee that was appointed by the LSA Executive Committee in 1985. Its members were: Judith Aissen (University of California, Santa Cruz), Paul Angelis (Southern Illinois University), Victoria Fromkin (University of California, Los Angeles), Frank Heny, Robert Jeffers (Rutgers University), D. Terence Langendoen (Graduate Center of the City University of New York), Manjari Ohala (San Jose State University), Ellen Prince (University of Pennsylvania), and Arnold Zwicky (The Ohio State University and Stanford University). The Steering Committee, in turn, received help from a Consultant Panel, whose members were: Ed Battistella (University of Alabama, Birmingham), Byron Bender (University of Hawaii, Manoa), Garland Bills (University of New Mexico), Daniel Brink (Arizona State University), Ronald Butters (Duke University), Charles Cairns (Queens College of CUNY), Jean Casagrande (University of Florida), Nancy Dorian (Bryn Mawr College), Sheila Embleton (York University), Francine Frank (State University of New York, Albany), Robert Freidin (Princeton University), Jean Berko-Gleason (Boston University), Wayne Harbert (Cornell University), Alice Harris (Vanderbilt University), Jeffrey Heath, Michael Henderson (University of Kansas), Larry Hutchinson (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis), Ray Jackendoff (Brandeis University), Robert Johnson (Gallaudet College), Braj Kachru (University of Illinois, Urbana), Charles Kreidler (Georgetown University), William Ladusaw (University of California, Santa Cruz), Ilse Lehiste (The Ohio State University), David Lightfoot (University of Maryland), Donna Jo Napoli (Swarthmore College), Ronald Macaulay (Pitzer College), Geoffrey Pullum (University of California, Santa Cruz), Victor Raskin (Purdue University), Sanford Schane (University of California, San Diego), Carlota Smith (University of Texas, Austin), Roger Shuy (Georgetown University), and Jessica Wirth (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee).

INNOVATIONS IN LINGUISTICS EDUCATION 3.1 (1983), 129-134

1. Adjusting to the Audience

A large number of undergraduate linguistics courses at American universities are populated by students in other fields whose sole reason for enrolling is to fulfill a requirement for their respective programs. These non-majors are not likely to pursue linguistic analysis or argumentation for its own sake. There may, in fact, be only one or two students out of several classes who become sufficiently serious about linguistics to complete a degree in it. When the instructor directs the course chiefly at such individuals, the others find the material dry and overly technical, and are not likely to take further linguistics courses on an elective basis. In these times in which the survival of programs and offerings increasingly depends on healthy full-time enrollment figures, linguists can ill afford to alienate students with courses that are uncompromisingly theoretical.

There are other difficulties with the 'no concessions' approach. Particularly in survey courses, the shortness of the single academic term dictates covering the core areas in so superficial a manner that even highly motivated students cannot genuinely achieve the desired basic literacy. Moreover, take-home examinations, though appropriate for more challenging courses, are not always practical. However, since in-class exams must be less demanding, instructors who use these tend to find themselves reassuring worried students that all they need to know about X is Y. If X, for example, is 'transformations', Y may be 'operations which convert underlying structures into surface structures'. This trivializes the learning task by encouraging rote memorization.

I have suggested that a linguistics course which is more than moderately technical will not 'reach' the majority of its (undergraduate) non-major audience, and can ultimately bring about its own demise. However, I believe it is indeed possible to impart to the average non-major a genuine sense of linguistics and what it is all about, without necessarily making the course as high-powered as beginning graduate-level courses. In the following sections, I will suggest that students should be encouraged to examine data until the patterns emerge, to gather their own data, and to explore topics that generally prove to be popular (e.g. dialects, language acquisition, sex differences in language).

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2. Teaching Techniques

Two techniques which have helped me make linguistics iess intimidating to non-majors in my classes involve reducing the amount of formalism, and defining new concepts by example (§2.a and b). At the same time, outside projects can raise the level of interest and participation, while students' analytic skills can be sharpened through problem-solving (§2.c).

2.a Minimizing Formalism

Many experienced linguistics instructors find themselves eliminating from Introduction to Language concepts they once never doubted should be included: phonological derivations, syntactic derivations, and comparisons between schools of thought, for example. This phenomenon is due at least as much to the difficulties students have in working with such concepts after brief exposure to them as it is (in some cases) to their becoming outdated. Even tne interpretation of something as seemingly straightforward as plus and minus feature notation can mystify students. So too can the formal statement of a transformation. Since the verbal expression of transformations often reduces the latter difficulty, in some cases at least the stumbling block is little more than the formalisms themselves.

Sometimes eliminating a problematic formalism can bring about unanticipated benefits. When several of my classes had difficulty with phrase structure (PS) rules even after I had stopped using parentheses and curly brackets, I stopped using PS rules entirely. My next group was then tutored more thoroughly in the substitution and movement tests for constituency. Once comfortable with tnese, they learned how to assign phrasal and lexical category labels to the constituents they had isolated. Ultimately, they could draw simple trees. Because I could no longer rely on PS rules to reveal possible interrelationships among constituents, I had to concentrate more on getting students to discover constituent relationships through their own analytic techniques. Thus by eliminating what amounted to something the students found useful but didn't really comprehend, I perhaps brought them to a deeper understanding of English sentence structure.[1]

2.b Defining by Example

Linguistics instructors are sometimes surprised at how difficult it is for some students to comprehe d technical terms. I have found that introducing a concept by way of examples, chosen in advance so that problematic ones can be edited out, offers several benefits. First, it encourages students to try to come up with their own definition.

Second, if the term is not introduced until students have seen the point of the examples, they will find it more necessary and meaningful. Third, an array of examples illustrating a single concept is not unlike the data of a problem set. We might regard the items of the set, either individually or together with other items, as illustrating particular concepts (e.g. reduplicative prefix, or minimal pair). When well-chosen examples are presented in class, they may help students attain the kind of directed thinking--focusing only on what is relevant--that is necessary for problem-solving. This is especially so when more subtle examples are included for discussion.[2]

2.c Projects and Problem-Solving

One way to raise students' level of personal involvement and interest is to direct them in small field projects. This allows students to see confirmed certain generalizations from lectures or readings. A simple project can help them discover for themselves that, for example, a single speaker's pronunciations of the same word will differ, depending on the style level. Projects are particularly worthwhile when the results are not what the investigators expect, for they are then led either to revise their hypothesis or sharpen their methodology, or else to question what others have had to say on the subject (see §3.c for a case in point).

A skill useful for analyzing data collected for a project is the ability to solve traditional linguistics problems. Linguists generally agree that problem-solving is worthwhile because of the conceptual skills it teaches. When students work several problems of the same general type (e.g. three or four illustrating different types of natural phonological classes), they see that they must view each set in its own terms, and remain flexible and inventive in their strategies. Since beginners rarely achieve this initially, their classical errors and rococo solutions can generate useful discussions or handouts.

3. Selected Subject Areas

I have suggested that data-oriented problems and projects have a place in beginning linguistics courses. In this section I shall focus on a phonetics problem and sociolinguistics project I have used successfully (§3.b and c), as well as a few subject areas I have found to be effective in Introduction to Language and Language and Society.

3.a Areas of Special Interest

Students who take only one or two courses in linguistics are likely

to be most receptive to topics that touch on their lives in rather obvious ways. Comments on course evaluation forms for Introduction to Language frequently make enthusiastic reference to animal communication, language and the brain, language acquisition, regional dialects, Black English, language and the sexes, and language and power. Students can be given a voice in deciding which of these topics to include.

A worthwhile opening topic in any linguistics course with no prerequisite is misconceptions about language and language use. Each semester, on the first day of class, I have the students fill out a true-false questionnaire.[3] And, term after term, they are surprised to find out that animal language is NOT on a par with human language, or that there are no natural languages that have only a few hundred words, or that young children do not particularly benefit from native language instruction. It can, then, be equally as important to touch on topics which students THINK they know something about as topics which they admit they know nothing about.

3.b Articulatory Phonetics

In introducing students to phonetics, perhaps the most difficult task is weaning them from English orthography. 'Sounds, not letters' is often a futile cry because in some students' minds, sounds simply ARE letters; they do not seem to grasp the significance of demonstrations to the contrary. Still, most students eventually do, and in this regard I use a problem that has been fairly effective. First, students list each letter of the English alphabet. Then for each letter, they give examples of words which contain it. Each word must represent one of the letter's different pronunciations, alone or in combination with other letters. To each unique sound students must assign a unique and made-up symbol. Finally, they try to describe, in ordinary terms, the physical production of each sound. Thus in addition to showing the lack of simple correspondence between letters and sounds, the exercise motivates the need for the symbols and especially the vocabulary of phonetics. A time limit--say, two hours--is advisable, as is a ban on textbook or dictionary use. Students who take the assignment seriously should experience success mixed with frustration, and will thus be grateful for the answers that articulatory phonetics provides.

3.c Language and Society

In a beginning course on sociolinguistics (often called Language and Society) it is usual to focus on language variation, social variation, and their interrelationships. One topic which turns up in the first or second week of most elementary linguistics courses is prescriptivist notions of 'ungrammaticality'. Prescriptivism has special

relevance to Language and Society because it relates to, and therefore leads naturally to discussions of, a number of other sociolinguistics topics: attitudes toward language, standard and nonstandard dialects, style level, regional dialects, and language change, particularly language change in progress. For this reason I give special attention to prescriptivism at the beginning of the term, more so than I would if I merely wanted students to examine and re-evaluate their views of 'right' and 'wrong' with respect to language.

An excellent way to increase students' awareness of variation in language is to have them carry out small field projects. Students tend to view projects positively, and generally do well with such topics as language used by or about women, or the manipulative language of advertising. When the class is small enough, members can present their findings. This shifts the rôle of 'teacher' away from the instructor, allowing students to learn from one another.

As stated earlier, projects sometimes have unexpected outcomes. A student of mine once chose an exercise in casual phonology suggested by Ann Zwicky in her "Styles" article in Shopen and Williams, *Style and Variables in English* (Winthrop 1981). The procedure was to ask several speakers to count from 65 to 85, and to note the various assimilations in the ten pronunciations of the word *seventy*. The student reported that she did not expect to find anything she did not already know (i.e. she did not expect to find variation). She was therefore quite surprised to distinguish five assimilated forms of *seventy*, and was further startled to discover that they all sounded quite natural to her.

Clearly, this student's sensitivity to phonological variation increased as a result of this project. So, apparently, did her subjects'. All were surprised when she told them what she had heard. One participant, she reported, "even denied that that was possible, as he 'never mispronounced words'". Her conclusion:

> ...this exercise not only made me more aware of the degree of variation allowed in my speech community... but also, there are now six other people listening for phonological differences in the speech they hear around them, not for the purpose of correction or changing anyone's speech patterns, but just for curiosity's sake and for the fun of it.

Through appropriate outside assignments, then, students put new knowledge to use, and can experience the excitement of sharing that knowledge with others.

4. Conclusion

There are some colleges and universities in this country in which linguistics does not enjoy a positive image. This is partly due to the number of students who must struggle through points of linguistic theory which they will promptly forget once the examination or course is over. However, instructors can make linguistics courses primarily serving non-majors more attractive by omitting certain topics, and incorporating others which are perhaps less central to the concerns of linguistic theory, but more interesting and useful to the non-specialist. Since linguistics overlaps with a number of disciplines, it both broadens and strengthens the background of students in linguistics-related fields. And the practice of viewing language phenomena analytically transfers well to areas which require the same type of thinking, such as mathematics or computer science. Linguistics courses tailored to the non-major can be just as challenging as those that are not. The type of challenge in the former case, however, is more appropriate to the audience, and is therefore more directed and meaningful.

NOTES

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at NYSCOL XI. I wish to thank Deborah Schaffer and Rachel Schaffer for their comments on that version.

[1]To be sure, I had already eliminated the overall organization of a transformational grammar, derivations, and was saying rather little about transformations. Certainly, someone teaching these notions could not sacrifice phrase structure rules.

[2]Whenever possible, I use 'live' data gathered from everyday conversation, television, radio, and the like. Students find the data more interesting and memorable, and on occasion bring in their own examples from these sources.

[3]The questionnaire is based on that in Geoghegan *et al.*, *Ohio State University Language Files*, Advocate Publishing Group, 1979 (revised, 1982).